

04/09/2003

Ministry's attitude doesn't augur well for researchers

W.R.

THE statement by the Malaysian Agricultural Research and Development Institute (Mardi) director-general Datuk Dr Saharan Anang that "limited budget allocations for local scientists to conduct research could hinder the country's effort of achieving sustainable scientific development" (NST, Aug 29) interests me.

Being a researcher myself in a local public university, I have doubts as to the seriousness of the Ministry of Science and Environment on the need to inculcate and sustain interest among local researchers to carry out scientific work.

In the Intensive Research in Priority Areas exercise of the Eighth Malaysia Plan, carried out by the ministry in late 2001, researchers were asked to write in proposals and they were quite encouraged by the fact that good and feasible proposals were awarded funds.

Under the Environmental and Applied (EA) Category, most of the grants were awarded for a period of two years beginning mid-2002. For purposes of monitoring, the awardees were rightly asked to submit to the ministry quarterly milestone achievement and financial reports.

The reports were submitted and the money spent according to the proposed schedule, but for some reason the money for the year 2003 did not appear. When I inquired, I was made to understand that at least 100 EA Category grants were involved.

What is more pathetic is the fact that most of the senior managers at the ministry are ex-professors from various local universities.

They should be the ones to ensure and advise the ministry on the importance of continuity of financial flow to ensure an uninterrupted employment of research officers and field workers, purchase of chemicals, equipment, stationery, etc, for quality research.

The ministry must be reminded that these proposals were written by researchers after putting in much thought, literature search, discussions and collaboration. They were put through stringent scrutiny and assessments before getting the recognition and financial support from the ministry.

The ministry cannot back out now when the research work is half-way through completion. So the statement from the Mardi director-general is only one half of the story.

The ministry even has a problem fulfilling its promise in continuing financial backing for on-going grants. If the ministry is not serious in addressing this problem, then I am afraid that with this lackadaisical attitude the vision of our Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad to see a Malaysian Nobel laureate in the near future may remain an empty dream.

W.R.
Penang